

[**this is the tunnel's light** by **katana_fleet**](#)

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Summary:

If it means she hates him, that's okay. If she says he's just like Papa, that's fine. If she never comes out of her room again, it'll be okay. If her hatred is the price he must pay to keep Eleven alive, he'll pay it.

He loves her more than he could have imagined he could love anyone since Sarah died.

He'll keep her safe if she kills him.

this is the tunnel's light

Author's Note:

title from 'ready aim fire' by imagine dragons. nothing is mine except my tears. all belongs to the duffer brothers, netflix, david harbour, and millie bobby brown. i swear i didn't mean to write this -- it just started writing itself about 29 seconds after i finished season 2 episode 9. thanks to saltwaterheartstrings for reading over this!

He's the next to talk to the kids, to get the real story, when he and Joyce bring Will home and he's resting safely in the hospital.

Dustin describes the screaming, both Eleven's and the monster's. Lucas mentions that the monster sort of exploded in a cloud of dust. Mike says only two words, words that make Joyce gasp, Nancy overflow with more tears, and his heart sink into further darkness.

"She's gone."

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He found the metal box in the woods a few months back, while he was searching for some vandals who were suspected to be holed up in the forest. He'd given the box a kick, opened it, and shrugged before running off to find the soon-to-be juvie residents.

On Christmas Eve, he leaves the Eggos for Eleven along with the normal leftovers. That should make her smile.

He doesn't know why, but he doesn't think she's dead any more than Mike Wheeler does, deep down. He's seen Mike's face throughout the weeks, and he's healing from the trauma of the Upside-Down no better than Joyce's kid. The pain of his belief is killing him.

The girl is too powerful for something as simple as destroying the demogorgon to kill her. It was probably not the hardest thing she'd ever done, up there with opening the portal in the first place, but she

had to be around here somewhere. If she wasn't in the forest, she was still in the Upside-Down, and she would make her way back eventually.

As he walks away, he knows he's being more than a little delusional. But it's Christmas Eve, and he refuses to believe another little girl died under his care.

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He finds El a few days later, when he's holding the leftover steak and toast for her. The waffles are gone and she's standing there, silent. Half-starved and almost hypothermic. But alive.

He was right.

"This will be your new home," he says when they stand in his grandfather's old place. The dust settles around them like a veil. "You'll be safe from the bad men here."

He can feel her smile echoed on his own face. He may not be able to protect Will from his own mind, or Joyce from her crushing guilt, or the town from whatever new nasties could pop up, but he can protect this kid from her monsters.

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It goes well, for a while. El doesn't argue with him about using her powers or leaving even though he knows it's only a matter of time before she explodes. He lets her see Mike even though he knows it'll be the thing that makes them fall apart.

He lies about her mother and doesn't mention Sarah's name. He can see the questions in her eyes as easily as he can see the demons that lurk in their brown depths. She doesn't tell him about the dreams that wake her at 4 AM. He hears her screams and his heart sinks. On the nights that she can't muffle her sobs, he steps into her room and sits next to her bed until she calms. He doesn't touch her and she doesn't leave her bed.

They don't break Rule 1.

As time goes on, they get antsy. She wants to leave the little house, and he needs her to be safe. He vows never to be like Brenner, her Papa, but he will do whatever he must to keep her alive.

Every night, he gets back from the station as early as possible. He brushes her up on her reading and she smiles. They watch stupid television together and they laugh.

She eats too many Eggos and he smokes too much. She doesn't talk enough and he doesn't know what to say. It's not perfect; nothing ever is in his life, but she's the first thing he hasn't destroyed in years.

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When he hears about the little Russian girl, his heart flips in his chest. He can't make sure she's okay if he doesn't know where she is.

El's left the house. She's going to see Mike and she doesn't care what happens to her.

The door of the little house is ajar when he finally gets back. He waits at the kitchen table, head in his hands, too scared even for a cigarette.

When he hears the cracking of her shoes in the woods, he jumps up and waits.

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If it means she hates him, that's okay. If she says he's just like Papa, that's fine. If she never comes out of her room again, it'll be okay. If her hatred is the price he must pay to keep El alive, he'll pay it.

He loves her more than he could have imagined he could love anyone since Sarah died.

He'll keep her safe if she kills him.

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The static coming through the walkie talkie makes his heart sink. He continues their code, knowing that she won't answer.

As he fumbles through an explanation for not having been home in too long, he feels tears well up in his eyes. He can't lose El, not now, when he's probably going to have to watch Will die, when that'll make him lose Joyce once and for all, when he's losing the last people he's cared for. He pulls the shock blanket closer around his shoulders, clutching the steering wheel.

"I don't want you to get hurt—at all," he mutters, trying not to make it obvious that he's crying now. "And I don't wanna lose you."

He adds some fatherly admonishes about her choices in food, the ones he would say if he were there in person.

Then he promises the one thing he can't be certain of.

"I will be home soon."

He shuts off the walkie talkie and rests his head against the steering wheel, wiping away the single fallen tear. Where is she?

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Of course it's Eleven who killed the demodog, as Dustin has fondly named them, and tossed it through the window. Of course it's his kid stepping through the door, eyeliner smudged around her face, with the most dramatic entrance he's ever seen, including when Sarah was five and a half and she put on a fashion show for him and Diane.

Mike steps toward El. They whisper each other's names and hug for way too long. Mike breathes some earnest words of continued friendship and love.

"353 days," El says. "I heard."

"Why didn't you tell me you were there?" Mike asks. His heart sinks. "That you were okay?"

He has to burst the bubble of joy at El's appearance. "Because I wouldn't let her." He steps up to his kid and pulls her close, muttering something about where she's been. She shoots back the same question and doesn't answer his. He doesn't care. She's here now, and she's accepting his hug. She's not pushing him away.

Five minutes later he's pulling a sobbing Mike Wheeler into his arms, and he feels like he's probably ruined more things than he can possibly imagine in the last year and a half.

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He interrupts El and Mike about to kiss as gruffly as he can. It's true, of course, that they need to leave for the lab. They need to be ready to close the gate as soon as Will is free from the shadow monster's hold.

Of course, he could also rip Mike's head off for daring to get that close to El. Fatherly instinct, probably. He never got to feel it with Sarah. He shouldn't be feeling it now. These kids are only thirteen. Too young for touchy-feely stuff.

Too young for any of this.

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They sit in silence for a minute until he can't hold back the questions. Five minutes later they've established that El found out her mother was alive and went to see her in a big truck driven by a nice man. He could strangle her, right then and there, for getting into the vehicle of a man she didn't know, but before he can really light into her, she says, "I shouldn't have left." Her face is pressed into the window, diligently not looking at him.

He didn't expect that. She's not telling him everything, of course, but he doesn't care. "No, this isn't on you, kid. I should've been there. I should never have lied to you about your mom. Or about when you could leave. A lot of things I shouldn't have done." So many things he should have done. He keeps talking, not really thinking about his words. "Sometimes I feel like—like I'm just some kind of black hole or something."

"A black hole?"

He destroys everything. He destroyed his child, his marriage, his life. Then she asks the question he's been dreading.

"Who's Sarah?"

His voice catches. “Sarah? Sarah’s my girl. She’s my little girl.”

“Where is she?”

He can’t tell her everything, not now, but she understands. “Gone,” she whispers. He vows right then to explain to El, someday, where his daughter is and what happened to her. Maybe then she’ll understand how he became this way.

“The black hole. It got her. And somehow I’ve just been scared, you know? I’ve just been scared that it would take you, too. I think that’s why I get so mad. I’m so sorry. For everything. I could be so, so—”

“Stupid?”

They laugh at the destruction of their most important rule, El’s giggle and hand in his making him feel that they can actually win against this monster. Her smile lights up the night.

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They stare at the opening in the lab’s wall, El’s breathing picking up and his heart rate racing. They stand there, glancing at each other and waiting. Finally, Jonathan’s voice comes through the walkie talkie. The confirmation that Will’s safe burns in his ears.

“Close it.”

The pulley system carries them down the hole in the ground. The breach glows before them.

She takes his hand, still bloody from the doc’s leg.

The shadow monster screams. He holds her hand as tightly as she’s clutching his. She looks up at him, the terror evident in her eyes. He can’t speak, so he nods a deadly confirmation. The fear turns to determination.

She lets go of him and stretches her hand out toward the breach.

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In all of his life, he's been scared of three things. Tarantulas, when he was little, although he's never admitted that to anyone but Sarah. The mutated cells coursing through his little girl's body. The Upside Down's tunnels below the field, dragging him into choking blackness.

This sight leaves them far behind.

Jane, the little girl he loves so much, is pushing back the monster on her own. Blood trickles from her nose, the tendons in her small hands stand out as she reaches out toward the breach, and she screams. Her power blinds him and makes every instinct scream to run away, but that's not what scares him. Neither do the baby demogorgons climbing the walls, searching to destroy them. Not even the ghastly shadow monster behind the wall she's repairing can frighten him.

He could lose his girl.

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When the breach is closed and the ghostly light fades, she crumples. He's there, kneeling on the floor of the lift, to grab her. He pulls her tightly against him.

"You did good, kid. You did so good."

She's crying and pulling his jacket too tight around his neck, but he doesn't care. His girl won.

When the lift gets back to the surface, a place he plans never to leave again, she's too weak to stand. He straightens his rifles across his back and scoops her up, settling her into his arms with care.

"Dad," she whispers. He stares down at her in shock. Her cheeks are streaked with tears and blood, but there's the faintest smile on her face. He smiles.

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He's there when she finally wakes up in the hospital bed. He's there throughout the whole thing, every vaccination and test and examination that she should have had when she was little.

When the doctor finally says two days later that she's stable enough to stay conscious longer than a few minutes, he sits down next to her and takes her hand. She squeezes it as tightly as she can. The fight took so much out of her; he sees the weariness in her eyes even now.

He places the blue hair elastic on her wrist. She stares at it and he can see in her widened eyes that she knows it was Sarah's.

"Would you be okay with it if I—adopted you?" he asks. He starts to explain the concept, but before he can finish, she's nodding fiercely and reaching toward him, as far as the wires and tubes will allow.

He hugs her back, tears filling his eyes. He doesn't think he's smiled this much in years.

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The papers are finalized, her name legally changed from nobody at all to Jane Hopper. She has a bedroom in his real house, clothes that fit correctly thanks to Nancy Wheeler, and a kitten named Fred. He has allergies, a growing phone bill, and a daughter again.

He drives her to the Snow Ball begrudgingly. He knows who she's meeting there, and he doesn't want to think about it. It's too soon for that, honestly, or else he's getting too old. Probably both.

"Dad?" El asks as they're getting out of the car in the middle school parking lot. He can't wait for her to be able to go to school next year so she can really learn what it's like to be a kid and maybe get some friends who aren't boys.

"Yeah, kid?"

"I—" she pauses as she takes in the decorations, the flashing lights, and the dance music they can hear from outside. Finally she turns and looks up at him, that smile he loves creeping over her face. "I love you."

He swallows against the sudden lump in his throat. "I love you too, El." She hugs him quickly, releases him before he's ready, and takes off toward the gym. He walks toward Joyce Byers, standing alone against her cold car and waiting for her boys.

He looks back at his little girl. Her profile, lit up by the lights she's running toward, shines.